Exploring the second phase of public journalism[1]

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Abstract

This paper examines the new forms of audience participation in journalism with regard to their possibility in achieving the goals of public journalism.[2] A typology of five models of audience connections is proposed: (1) traditional journalism, (2) public journalism, (3) interactive journalism, (4) participatory journalism, and (5) citizen journalism. Identifying the higher goal of public journalism as engaging the people as citizens and helping public deliberation, I argue that the new forms of audience participation could further these goals only by infusing the value from and learning the techniques of public journalism. The concept of community, of public deliberation, past research on the Internet, and data obtained from my field study is drawn upon.

Keywords

Public journalism, civic journalism, citizen journalism, participatory journalism, interactive journalism, online journalism

Author's biography

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Introduction

Web logs (blogs), a form of self-publishing on the web, have drawn much interest in the last few years. Part of the interest arises from the suggestion that citizen journalism -- blogs being one form used for it -- gives the people a voice and therefore power (Gillmor 2004). The people's participation itself and what they produce are regarded with the hope to contribute to an informed citizenry (Bowman and Willis 2003; Gillmor 2004) and democracy (Bowman and Willis 2003). At the same time, public journalism, a movement that arose in the United States that aims to strengthen democracy, has declined in momentum (Friedland 2003). The main funder of public journalism – the Pew Center for Civic Journalism – ceased operation in May 2003, and its former executive director, Jan Schaffer, now heads the Institute for Interactive Journalism, which funds citizen web projects.[3] The key academic proponent of public journalism, Jay Rosen, who directed the Project on Public Life and the Press, now publishes a web log, PressThink. The Civic Journalism Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication discussed in 2004 whether they should change the group's name to "Civic and Participatory Journalism Interest Group". The group's vice chair, Tony DeMars (2004), explained the consideration in a similar vein: "Public journalism's tenets have the best chance of being advanced by the public using Weblogs and other electronic communication tools. Citizens, who are so much a part of the public journalism philosophy, no longer have to be invited into the mix. They are part of the mix."

Lewis Friedland said in 2003 that public journalism is at a crossroad. He cited a decision made by the *Wichita Eagle* (*WE*) – one of the earliest newspapers that experimented with

what later came to be called public journalism – in 1999 as an indication of the turning

point in the practice of public journalism: *WE* turned down a request from the local

school superintendent for a partnership to involve citizens in deliberating about the

passing of a school bond issue, but covered the superintendent's involvement of the

citizens in great depth and detail, "polling the community, searching for the reasons for

the loss of public trust, and asking what it would take to restore it" (Friedland 2003: 1).

This "civic journalism done at arm's length" (Rick Thames, *WE*'s editor then, cited in

Friedland 2003: 1) marks a departure from the previous phase of public journalism, when

news organizations often helped public deliberation through initiating, organizing and

facilitating public meetings. It put the initiative for public life back to the community.

What could be the role of news organizations in a new phase of public journalism? Can

the new forms of journalism that involves the audience replace public journalism in

achieving the goal of helping public life? Is public journalism still relevant? Are there

experiences in the public journalism movement that are valuable if the goals of public

journalism remain? To answer these questions, I shall identify the goals of public

journalism and explicate the related concepts, and then, positioning public journalism as

one of five models of journalism, examine what the recent forms of audience

involvement can and cannot offer regarding the goals of public journalism.

Goals of public journalism

The term "public journalism" emerged in the United States probably in 1993 (Rosen

1999) as part of a movement concerned about a double disconnect – between

journalists/news organizations and the citizenry/communities, and between the American people and public life (Rosen 1999). Its early proponents suggested that the problem of declining news readership could be addressed if the American people were re-engaged in public life (Merritt 1991? Rosen 1999). Journalism should help public life go well, the public journalism advocates say (Fouhy 1995; Rosen et al. 1997). For over a decade afterwards, public journalism has become a controversy. A national survey in 2001 of U.S. dailies with circulation of more than 20,000 found that 66% of the editors said they either embrace the label of civic journalism or like its philosophy and tools (Campaign Study Group 2001). At the same time, both the practice and the ideas of public journalism have drawn much attack (Corrigan 1999; Glasser 1999). What the supporters and critics agree is that the term "public journalism" means different things for different people (Corrigan 1999; Glasser 1999; Lambeth 1998; Voakes 2004).

Early adovocates urged news organizations to cover the issues that people are concerned about in their communities (Fouhy 1995); journalists are challenged to frame stories that include and address the people as citizens (Rosen 1997), and to provide information that enables the people to act as citizens (Fouhy 1995; Schaffer 1999). Public journalism seeks to increase the capacity of the community to act on the news (Rosen et al. 1997), and to help the community deliberate its problems in search for solutions (Fouhy 1995; Rosen et al. 1997). Some have tried to define public journalism more precisely. Lambeth's (1998: 17) definition, described as "the most explanatory (and ideologically neutral)" (Voakes 2004), for example, defines public journalism as "a form of journalism that seeks to:

1) listen systematically to the stories and ideas of citizens even while protecting its freedom to choose what to cover;

2) examine alternative ways to frame stories on important community issues;

3) choose frames that stand the best chance to stimulate citizen deliberation and build understanding of issues;

4) take the initiative to report on major public problems in a way that advances public knowledge of possible solutions and the values served by alternative courses of action;

5) pay continuing and systematic attention to how well and how credibly it is communicating with the public."

However, for the purpose of this paper, the goals of public journalism in helping democracy can be summarized as:

1. to connect to the community,

2. to engage individuals as citizens, and

3. to help public deliberation in search for solutions.

These three broad goals are consistent with the ones used in a recent survey conducted by the Indiana University School of Journalism about civic journalism (Poynteronline 2003):

1. giving ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs;

2. motivating ordinary people to get involved in public discussions of important issues; and

3. pointing people toward possible solutions to society's problems.

This paper does not seek to examine whether the goals of public journalism are worthwhile, or to what extent they have been achieved. Rather, this paper starts from the stated goals of public journalism and, drawing on my own and other researchers' studies, measures the practices of participatory and citizen journalism against them to see how far these goals can be achieved.

Citizenship, community, and deliberation

First, it is necessary to explicate several concepts central to the ideas of public journalism.

Citizenship

Jay Rosen (1997: 17) distinguished the "citizen" from the "consumer" or "client": "To position people as citizens means to treat them:

- as making their own contribution to public life.

- as potential participants in public affairs.

- as citizens of the whole, with shared interests.

- as a deliberative body – that is, a public with issues to discuss.

- as choosers, decision makers.

- as learners, with skills to develop.

- as connected to place and responsible for place.

To ask people to deliberate with others goes beyond asking them to express their opinions; it involves demanding "a certain standard of citizenship — which includes civility, mutual respect, informed participation, a willingness to listen and respond" (Rosen, 1997: 20).

Community

The concept of community used in public journalism literature is never explicated. Following what Michael Schudson (1999) read from the context of its usage, I would say that the community in the terms of public journalism is associated with the geographical area in which the news organization distributes its news product, and is meant to be the location of public life.

A shared geographical area was a central component in the concept of community in earlier studies. The next most common components were the existence of common ties and social interaction (Elias 1974). The emphasis on a shared locality decreased from the 1950s as scholars acknowledged the existence of urban neighborhoods, beside rural villages, as communities (Janowitz 1967). The symbolic approach, such as Anderson's (1983) in the study of the formation of nations – which contends that a community is imagined by its members as a mental construct through the sharing of common forms, further diminishes the importance of a locality as a component of a community. Some (Castells 1997) have criticized the emphasis on the "imagined" notion of communities, and assert that shared experience is the basis on which a community is built. Condensing these ideas, it can be stated that a community encompasses four key components:

1. a sense of belonging among members;

2. shared forms among members;

3. interactions among members; and

4. social ties among members.

The concept of community without a shared locality has formed the basis of a decade of research on Internet communities. Using this concept of community, it is possible to form political communities through discussion of public issues on web sites.

Deliberation

Davis "Buzz" Merritt, one of the news editors who started the public journalism movement, cited the president of the Kettering Foundation, David Mathews (1994), in explicating deliberation: "To deliberate is not just to 'talk about' problems. To deliberate means to weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for action and the views of others" (1997:35). Definitions of deliberation vary a great deal among theorists. Generally speaking, it can be described as "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers 2003). Ideally, a well-ordered deliberation is based on full information and the representation of all points of view (Chambers 2003). This requires in the minimum equal opportunity for people to participate in the process (Bohman 1997; Chambers 2003; Christiano 1997; Cohen 1997; Knight and Johnson 1997).

The element of audience involvement, which marked public journalism from the way journalism was traditionally practiced, has now appeared in new forms. In the following I shall propose a typology of five models of journalism that encompasses these new forms, and then examine these forms in relation to the goals of public journalism.

Models of connection between mainstream journalism and the people

According to the practices observed, the connection between mainstream journalism and the people can be categorized as: (1) traditional journalism, (2) public journalism, (3) interactive journalism, (4) participatory journalism, and (5) citizen journalism.

Traditional journalism

In traditional journalism, professional journalists are the gate-keepers who filter through the happenings of the world, select the significant events, and report them for their audience. The people do not play any part in the news process except as news sources from which journalists gather information and opinion. But most people, except government officials and those who bear titles, have little chance of becoming news sources. Otherwise, the journalists perform the entire news process, from story idea generation, news gathering, writing, editing, to publishing, exercising their professional news values at every stage. Members of the news audience could send letters to the editor or lodge complaints after the news is delivered, which may feedback to the journalists for making corrections or for future reference.

Public journalism

In trying to address the double disconnect, public journalism aims to engage the people as citizens both in the news making process and the use of the news. Town hall meetings, citizen panels, and polls are common techniques used to tap the concerns of the community, which would then form the reporting agenda for the journalists. During the news gathering process, professional journalists often report back to the citizens what

they have found for generating discussion in search of solutions to the problems (Charity 1995). There have been cases where the citizens even partnered with the professionals in gathering the news.[4] However, the professional journalists generally remain the gatekeepers in editing the stories and publishing the news, which frames the issues and presents the story elements in a way that addresses public concerns and helps the people to participate in the community. Pieces written by citizens are often included as part of a public journalism package (Friedland and Nichols 2002).

Interactive journalism

Interactivity is a concept that many researchers of online journalism (Greer and Mensing 2003; Kamerer and Bressers 1998; Massey and Levy 1999; Rosenberry 2005; Schultz 1999; Tankard and Ban 1998; Ye and Li 2004) have employed, but few have explicated. Massey and Levy (1999) summarized the uses for the term into two dimensions: (1) content interactivity, and (2) interpersonal interactivity. Content interactivity is enabled not only by the technical capabilities that allow users to free themselves from the linearity set by the professional journalists, but also by the complexity of choice of content made available. Interpersonal interactivity is potentially possible if capabilities of communicating with the content producers and other users are provided, but takes place only when professional journalists answer inquiring emails or chat with users, and when users respond to postings of others on messages boards and chat sessions.

The web, which houses the online sites of news organizations, has been the platform used for interactive journalism. It is this context that this paper takes for discussion. As the

involvement of the news users takes place after the news is published, the professional journalists are responsible for producing the news content for publication. Towards the late 1990s, some public journalism projects adopted interactive techniques.

Participatory journalism

Although public journalism allows the participation of news users in the news making process, the term "participatory journalism" has been coined recently as mainstream journalism now accepts the idea of giving news users the chance to express their views about public affairs. But the term is used inconsistently: sometimes it is used to include a phenomenon which is more appropriately called citizen journalism (Lasica 2003); sometimes what rightfully is participatory journalism is called citizen journalism (Gillmor 2005). Wikipedia, the online collaborative encyclopedia, defines participatory journalism and citizen journalism as the same phenomena. I think it is fruitful to distinguish the two.

News users could participate in the news making process in multiple ways, but in the recent development, participatory journalism takes the form of the news users generating content, more or less independently of the professionals, whereas the professionals generate some other content, and also produce, publish and market the whole news product. User contribution is solicited within a frame designed by the professionals. In this definition, South Korea's OhmyNews is a case of participatory journalism.

Participatory journalism seems to be drawing increasing interest among new media entrepreneurs as well as mainstream news organizations. In April 2005 alone, two ventures, YourHub.com and Mytown.dailycamera.com were launched within two days in Colorado (Dube 2005). New media entrepreneurs who adopt participatory journalism tend to focus on hyperlocal news (Jarvis 2004). In these products, user contribution forms (almost) the entire content. OurLittleNet's site on Rosewell, Georgia, and Backfence.com's community sites on McLean and Reston (Virginia) are such examples. This model of participatory hyperlocal news is being experimented by some mainstream news organizations, like The Bakersfield Californian, which produces *The Northwest Voice*, a bi-weekly newspaper and web site; and Morris Publishing Group, which publishes *Bluffton Today*, a daily newspaper and web site in South Carolina.

Most mainstream news organizations adopt participatory journalism like the BBC's "Have your say" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/default.stm), which probes news users of their views about the news and then publishes them in a particular section of the news product. Less common is to actively solicit the experiences and stories from news users like MSNBC's Citizen Journalists Report (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6639760/), where an editor suggests assignments for whoever interested to report on specified aspects of developing news stories (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6639760/).

The "Letters to the editor" section of newspapers could be considered a forerunner of participatory journalism, although the submitted letters were likely to be more heavily

edited than the participatory contributions are. Public journalism projects that included

stories written by news users were the pioneer of participatory journalism as they

published the experiences, not just views, of news users.

The above four models of journalism do not necessarily describe the totality of individual

news operations, but may describe moments or sections of individual operations.

Citizen journalism

Where the people are responsible for gathering content, visioning, producing and

publishing the news product, I call citizen journalism. In this model, professionals are not

involved at all (unless in the capacity of citizens but not as paid employees). It can be one

or a number of individuals, a citizen group, or a nonprofit organization without a paid

staff running a news blog, news web site, community radio station, or newspaper. To

qualify as journalism, the content needs to include some original interviewing, reporting,

or analysis of events or issues to which people other than the authors have access. A

prominent example of this model is the transnational multimedia Indymedia site. A new

endeavor in the United States is technology columnist Dan Gillmor's Bayosphere site.

The photographs and videos taken of the tsunami in South Asia by tourists and the local

people in December 2004 would amount to citizen journalism if they were published by

the people themselves, but would be participatory journalism if the material was handed

to a mainstream news organization for publication.

The five models of audience connection proposed above vary on the extent and form of people participation, with citizen journalism involving the people to the greatest extent, and traditional journalism the least. Interactive journalism gives the users initiative after the news is published, whereas participatory journalism gets the users to gather the news. Public journalism encompasses a wide range of experimentation in engaging citizens as advisers and partners in news gathering and writing, while also allowing interaction after news publication. The spectrum it covers seems to span beyond either interactive or participatory journalism. Of these five models, interactive, participatory, and citizen journalism are drawing increasing interest (Walker 2004). Ninety percent of daily newspaper editors in the U.S. agreed that the future health of the newspaper industry depended upon more interactivity with readers (Group 2001). It is to these three models that I turn in the following to see to what extent and in what ways they may achieve the goals of public journalism.

Measuring interactive journalism against public journalism

The potential of electronic connection for advancing democracy has drawn much research interest (Bryan et al. 1998; Downing 1989; Montgomery et al. 2004; Nip 2004b; Rainie et al. 2005; Smith 2005; Surman and Reilly 2003; van de Donk et al. 2004). How online news operations specifically may play a part in democracy has not been studied much. Early studies on online news found that many news sites contained repurposed content of their offline counterparts, and made minimal use of the interactive capabilities (Boczkowski 2004; Schultz 1999; Tankard and Ban 1998). A study of the major U.S. news sites during the 2004 presidential primary election campaign found that compared

to the 2000 campaign, fewer interactive links were offered for readers to ask reporters

questions, send e-mail comments, vote or opine on an issue or otherwise actively

participate. Instead the ability for proactive news consumption – in customizing static

information, or searching information – was enhanced (Rosenstiel et al. 2004). Focusing

on the potential of online journalism in helping democracy, a recent study of 47 U.S.

daily newspapers similarly found that many of the online features have not been used:

Only three of the 12 devices used to operationalize online facilitation of cyber-democratic

practices were present at more than 50% of the papers, while seven were used by fewer

than a third of the papers (Rosenberry 2005).

To examine the possibility of attaining the goals of public journalism in online interactive

journalism, the online features that have been measured in previous studies of news sites

are grouped according to their relevance to each goal as follows, and their presence is

reviewed:

To connect to the community

- Listing of general email address/staff email addresses

- Articles with email links to authors

- Posting form to contact newsroom/for letters to the editor

To engage individuals as citizens

- News archive with or without search engine

- Customized news service

- Links to other sites designed to promote discussion, such as e-the-People

  (www.e-thepeople.org)

- E-mail links to candidates, officials, and institutions

- Links to sites such as government sites with general information or voting

  information as well as election-related material, including candidates'

  personal/campaign sites and third-party information/advocacy sites, e.g.

  Factcheck.org, Vote-Smart.org, Move-On.org.

- Interactive storytelling/games

- Layering/hyperstory formulation of stories on civic issues or elections

- Citizen blogs

- Online polls

- Opportunity to "talk back" on a story, editorial or letter to the editor

- Citizen input (e.g. from message boards and blogs) used in stories, and/or

  editorials.

To help public deliberation in search of solutions

- Message boards about public affairs

- Chats

The features grouped under the first goal are channels provided for readers to express

their views to the news organization, and therefore relevant to the goal of connecting to

the concerns of the community. The features classified under the second goal engage the

people as citizens in different ways. Archives and customarizable news content enable

news users to form a coherence around issues, which helps to arouse people's concern

(Harwood et al. 1993), although customarizable content also may narrow the people's

concerns to selected issues. Links and online story telling techniques help to provide the

people with the information they seek to act as citizens (Fouhy 1995; Schaffer 2004). The

act of linking to citizen blogs itself is an endorsement by the news organization of the

potential value of the blogs, and thus an acknowledgement of the value in the voice

(although not necessarily its content) of the blog authors. The use of polls (assuming they

are not market research polls) to tap the opinions of the people, the provision of the

opportunity to talk back, and the use of citizen content is inclusion of the people as actors

in the news (Rosen 1997). The features under the third goal provide the opportunity of

conversation among participants, which is essential for any deliberation to take place.

The following review of past research will show that the features which bear the potential

for helping the community to deliberate are rarely found, whereas those that connect the

news organization to the community are the most common. This suggests that interactive

journalism, despite harboring the potential, is not achieving the higher goals of public

journalism to any great extent.

Connecting to the community

Of the online features identified above, a general email address is the most commonly

provided. Its presence rose from around 95% in 1997-8 to being universal. Greer and

Mensing (2003) found it on 95.2% of 83 online newspapers in February 1997, and 100%

in 81 of the same panel of papers in February 2003. Kamerer and Bressers (1998) found

it on 94% of 140 online newspapers in November 1997; Tankard and Ban (1998) found it

on 96% of 135 papers in February 1998; and Schultz (1999) found it on 94% of 100

online papers in the summer of 1998. In Asia, a study conducted on 44 English-language

web newspapers in March/April 1998 found that nearly all of the newspapers provided a

general email feedback link (Massey and Levy 1999).

The provision of a select number or a directory staff email addresses has almost doubled

between 1998-9 to 2004, from about half of the papers to over 90%. Kamerer and

Bressers (1998) found that 57% of the papers studied provided the ability to email a

certain individual. Schultz (1999) found a total of 54% of the newspapers either provided

a directory or a select number of email addresses. Greer and Mensing (2003) found the

feature on 93.4% of the online papers.

But as in 1998, only 10% of online papers provided author email links as a general

pattern. Over two-thirds (67%) did not provide direct e-mail links from the stories to the

authors. At the same time, only half of the online newspapers ran a letters section

(Schultz 1999). By October 2004, the facility to submit letters to the editor had increased

to 89% of the papers (Rosenberry 2005).

On the whole, all the news organizations are providing some online channels for people

to send in their views, although in some cases, the connection remains on a faceless level

where the news user does not know which particular individual she is addressing.

Engaging individuals as citizens

Some, but not all, features that help to engage the people as citizens have become more

common in online newspapers. Substantially more online newspapers in the U.S. have

provided news archives since the late 1990s -- from about two-thirds to over 90%. Kamerer and Bressers (1998) found that within 1997 the figure jumped from 34% in April to 52% in November; Tankard and Ban (1998) found news archives with search engines on 64% of online papers; Greer and Mensing (2003) found archives on 69.9% of papers in 1997, and 95% in 2003. The number of papers with long-term archives jumped from 38.6% in 1997 to 67.5% in 2003 (Greer and Mensing 2003). In Asia, the figures seemed higher -- nearly three-fourths of the newspapers provided searchable archives in March/April 1998 (Massey and Levy 1999), but more recent data is not available

Customarizable news service is a feature that has *not* become increasingly common. It existed in 9% of the online papers in 1997, peaked at 27.2% in 1998, and then dropped off until 2002 and 2003, when 24.4% of sites analyzed offered the feature (Greer and Mensing 2003). Tankard and Ban (1998) found a lower figure of 4% for customarizable content. In Asia, 3 of 44 papers (6.8%) offered news customization features in 1998 (Massey and Levy 1999).

In the late 1990s, hyperlinks in stories were rare, but they may have increased. Tankard and Ban (1998) found that 94% of stories did not have them. Schultz (1999) found that only 8% of newspapers provided email links to politicians. Massey and Levy's (1999) study in Asia found that about one-tenth of the newspapers provided story hyperlinks to on-site background content or a relevant external web site. In 2004, Rosenberry (2005), however, found that 19% of online papers provided hyperlinks to officials, 21% to political discussion sites, and 62 % to other political information sites. One interpretation

of the jump is indeed the provision of hyperlinks has become more common. Another possible interpretation is: Rosenberry's content analysis was conducted in October 2004, during the last phase of the U.S. presidential elections; the presence of the hyperlinks might have been inflated by the special election coverage.

Interactive games were found in 3 % of online newspapers in 1998 (Tankard and Ban 1998); by 2004, 36% of online papers provided interactive storytelling or games, and hyperstory presentation was found in 30 % of the cases (Rosenberry 2005). As for online polls, the figures vary substantially. Tankard and Ban (1998) found them on only 10% of online papers, but Schultz (1999) found them on 24% of papers. The difference may have to do with the fact that Tankard and Ban (1998) excluded those polls used to rate the sites. Before the presidential elections in 2004, online polls were found on 51% of online newspapers; facilities to talk back were provided in 30% of the cases (Rosenberry 2005). An early study among journalists of the *New York Times*, one of the papers known for innovation in online journalism (Gillmor 2004), found that none of them visited the paper's online forums regularly (Schultz 1998). Still in 2004, story input, as well as citizen blogs, was allowed only on 6% of papers (Rosenberry 2005).

Many say that the practices of public journalism have been incorporated into regular journalism without being labeled as such. However, the figures above suggest that many of the online capabilities that could help to engage the people as citizens, particularly those that alter the dominant role of the professional journalists, have not been provided to a large extent. Those devices that have seen a rise are informational ones. It is

interesting that hyperlinks to other web sites are far more common than hyperlinks to

officials, although both of them take the user traffic away from the news site. This may

have resulted from the perception that directing the news users to the officials goes

beyond the role of journalism in providing information. Interactive storytelling and

hyperstory telling requires database interactivity, the resources required of which may

explain why only about one-third of the online papers offer the features. That the

opportunity to talk back exists in less than one-third of the cases reflects that news is still

largely provided by the professionals as one-way traffic. Public journalism engages the

people in a back-and-forth cycle "from listening to talking it over, listening to talking it

over" in identifying the news agenda, framing the question, and deliberating the costs and

options in solving the problem (Charity 1995); interactive journalism is not allowing the

public comparable opportunity to contribute to the news process. The minimal presence

of citizen blogs further reveals the privilege accorded to the professionals in this model of

journalism.

Helping community deliberation

Online forums, a feature that makes deliberation possible, seems to have become more

common. But still during election time, only 45% of online newspapers provided them

(Rosenberry 2005). In August 2003, the figure was 39.2% among 120 online newspapers

(Ye and Li 2004). In 1998, forums were found in around one-third of online papers --

33% according to Schultz (1999), and 26% according to Tankard and Ban (1998).

However, live chat, the other feature that could support deliberation, seems to have

become less common -- only 2% of the online newspapers studied in late 2004 provided

live chat (Rosenberry 2005), whereas in 1998, Tankard and Ban's (1998) study found

live chats on 12%, and Schultz's study (1999) found them on 8% of the online

newspapers. In Asia, live chat was found in fewer than one-fifth of the web papers

studied (Massey and Levy 1999).

Practicing public journalism online

It is clear that the mere availability of the capabilities on the Internet does not mean that

they will be adopted by news sites, not least for enhancing democracy. Judging from the

features provided on online newspapers, connection to the community is the one goal of

public journalism that seems to be advancing to the largest extent. On engaging the

individuals as citizens, it mainly stays on the level of providing information to enable

smart decisions. Very little is accommodated for the people to be included as actors in the

news process. As for helping public deliberation, even the provision of the facility has a

long way to go. A national survey among the larger circulation U.S. dailies found that

self-professed civic editors were more likely to include user participation features online.

More of them reported that their papers published with every story the reporters' email

addresses (63%) and phone numbers (51%) than non-civic journalism editors (51% and

38% respectively). Civic journalism editors also were more likely than non civic

journalism editors to report that they provided for reader feedback and participation in

several avenues including email/voice mail or web tip line (83% vs 72%), news meeting

visits (62% vs 38%), publishing reader feedback other than letters to the editor (56% vs

44%), and reader advisory boards (47% vs 36%). However, interestingly, civic

journalism practitioners (69%) were no more likely than non-practitioners (70%) to give

readers the option of publishing their stories or ideas (Group 2001), which diminishes the professional dominance of the professionals.

Of course, it is the use of the features, rather than their mere presence, which makes a difference. Earlier studies that investigated the actual responsiveness of the news organizations found in one case that NBC had no intention of looking at the emails sent in (Newhagen et al. 1995), and in another case that only 18% of emails sent to the general email address received replies (Massey and Levy 1999), which suggest that technical capabilities provided are not always backed up by the value of public listening. Helping democracy is the ultimate goal of the public journalism movement. Interactive journalism will need dedication to the same goal before the conditions and techniques could be explored to approach the goal. A survey among online editors of the larger circulation U.S. newspapers on their 2000 presidential elections coverage found that only four out of 57 reported that stimulating political discourse was a goal they strived at (Singer 2003).

Understanding the conditions under which online news operations could achieve the goals of public journalism is necessary. On helping the community to deliberate in search of solutions, studies on online communities can suggest that two issues need to be addressed for any possibility of deliberation to take place. Firstly, administration that forms a civilized environment in the online space is needed. *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, a newspaper with ample experience in public journalism, decided to close down its message boards on the newspaper's site in 2004 when "swearing, insults, name calling, and hostile comments," which have come to be called "flaming" (Kiesler et al. 1984),

made discussion -- not to say deliberation -- impossible. Before closing down, the

newspaper relied on participants' complaints to act and has disabled access to certain

participants, because the volume of traffic, of between one to two thousand messages a

day, demanded too much resource for moderation (Ken Sands, online publisher, *The

Spokesman-Review*, author's interview, 7 March 2005). When the newspaper set up a

new message board in May 2005 for discussing the mayor's sex scandal covered by the

newspaper, a set of online forum standards was posted. There is no reason why if a

moderator is considered needed, that person needs to be a professional journalist.

Moderators wield different powers, from disabling access, to monitoring, previewing, or

pre-censoring the postings, to merely posting rules of conduct for participants to follow.

Some online spaces also have participants forming among themselves councils to settle

disputes (Kollock and Smith 1996). Different policies of administration give different

degrees of control to the professional journalists, and conversely participants of the

forums, and set different terms for the community's participation.

Secondly, a mechanism needs to be instituted to raise certain public issues for discussion

in the different online spaces. Public journalists may be interested in calling upon their

understanding obtained from the emails sent in and responses made to polls in deciding

what issue to raise in a chat session. More democratic mechanisms of deciding on the

topics of discussion are also entirely possible. The experience from public journalism

town hall meetings where facilitators are involved seems to be relevant. An early view

about Internet communities suggested that synchronous communication applications such

as chat facilitated community formation more than asynchronous applications, but

asynchronous applications such as message boards have now been recognized to have the advantage of allowing people to log on at different times and giving time for thinking, which deters impulsive behavior. Message boards could be used in conjunction with chat sessions as spaces for recruiting concerned citizens, and venues for pushing forward a discussion towards deliberation. Some news organizations are not keen in conducting chat sessions because of the human resources required. Those who do hold chats tend to imitate the television chat show format in inviting a big name as guest to receive questions. This arrangement falls short of the equality requirement of public deliberation.

It also needs to be remembered that differences in financial resources, education and technological literacy will always make the Internet far from adequate in achieving the goal of connecting or engaging the community as a whole. In public journalism projects, newspapers often partner with television and radio stations to reach the widest possible cross sections of the community. Online news sites should be better seen as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, the range of media for furthering the engagement of the public.

The above discussion has made it clear that the goals of public journalism will not be achieved merely because the web allows various technical capabilities. Interactive journalism is not a substitute for public journalism. The goals of public journalism can be achieved only if the value of involving the public in deliberative democracy guides news practice. Then the lessons from public journalism efforts and understanding of online deliberation can be taken to deploy the technical features.

Conditions of participatory journalism for advancing public journalism

To illuminate the implications of the fairly new model of participatory journalism on public life, I shall use a case that aims to generate most of its content from its users. From 22 February to 4 March 4 2005, I conducted participant observation at *The Northwest Voice* (*NWV*) (http://northwestvoice.com/), an early endeavor of this model of journalism greeted with interest by the journalism profession (Dube 2004; Outing 2004; Walker 2004). *NWV* is a web site plus a bi-weekly 24 to 32-page community tabloid (with the plan of eventual abolition of the print version) started in May 2004 and distributed free-of-charge in the northwest neighborhood of Bakersfield, California. The paper's staff consists of four-and-a-half people – the half-time publisher, editor, designer, sales and production manager, and a sales executive. It takes the policy that all contributions relevant to the neighborhood, unless are libelous, will be published on its site with minimal editing, and a selection of the contributions are published in the newspaper.

During my observation, the editor, apart from writing the cover story, covered certain community events and initiated interaction with the community to generate content. She also publicized the paper by staging a presence in community events and by visiting community groups. The kind of interaction initiated included calling for submissions to a contest of pet photographs, submissions of "question of the week" (which the editor would answer) or "photo of the week," asking for views about things such as Michael Moore's film Fahrenheit 9/11 to solicit short quotes for use as "neighborhood voices." The staff's writing amounted to about 20% of the content. Around 60% of the paper's content came from unpaid commissioned columnists and volunteering contributors. The

rest of the content was either write-ups from interactions, messages for the readers such as calls to "share your voice", or event listings.

It would appear that by handing over the news hole, the news organization certainly builds a good connection with its community. The goal of connecting to the community in public journalism, however, is set to enable news organizations to understand the concerns of the members of the community as citizens so the news organization could focus on those issues for reporting. In the case of *NWV*, the members of the community certainly are given the freedom to write about whichever they are concerned about, but the content categories that the community paper sets out to call for contribution revolve around the *private* interests or concerns of the individuals as parents, students, or teachers. A letter undersigned by the staff of *NWV* asking for submissions suggests these topics:

- Team tryouts

- Sports events

- Arts events

- Fundraising events for schools or clubs

- Parent teacher club meetings

- Open house nights

- Sports scores

- Choir performances

- Academic achievement events

- Articles about special students, special teachers or special programs offered at your school

These content categories were what the newspaper found in its pre-publication research people would be interested in (Mary Lou Fulton, author's interview, 24 February 2005). As the paper's founding publisher, Mary Lou Fulton, explains, "In *The Northwest Voice*, we were trying to create a home for the ordinary victories in day-to-day life -- the things that matter; the things that you tell your spouse about or you talk to your children about or you remember as special, that don't fit our contemporary definition of news" (Mary Lou Fulton, author's interview, 24 February 2005). Although *NWV* does not seek to engage the people as citizens by giving them their voices on public issues, the opportunity to publish has seen a piece written by a librarian that called for the setting up of a mobile library, and another by a university professor that discussed the federal government's "No Child Left Behind Act."

Interestingly, the community paper considers that the responsibility to report on the government rests with its staff, who are journalistically trained to report in a fair and balanced manner (Mary Lou Fulton, author's interview, 24 February 2005). When its staff reported on public issues, techniques often used by public journalism were used, like laying out story elements in a user-friendly manner, giving tips on how people could participate in the government process, and calling for readers to submit questions to the officials. However, these attempts at engagement do not necessarily arise from the fact that people contribute to content. Anyhow, the call for people to send in questions to the school board candidates did not receive any response (Lauren Ward, *NWV* editor, author's interview, 24 February 2005).

Writing for the newspaper, however, does generate a sense of community among the columnists and contributors, which I found from interviews. It can be argued that when the people are bound by a stronger sense of "we" ness, the community is more alert to the issues it faces as a collective. In this sense, the contribution of content from private individuals may achieve the goal of engaging the people in public issues in an indirect way. If the number of people who contribute is substantial, this effect may apply to the community as a whole. For the issues of *NWV* between 13 May 2004 and 17 February 2005, contributions -- letters, columns, activity reports, photographs, event notices, recipes, and other items – ranged from 20 to over 120 per issue, with most issues receiving around 30 contributions (*Northwest Voice* Metrics Review, 22 February 2005). These came from a neighborhood consisting of 24,000 homes. Photograph is the most popular format of contribution. The columns were on horses, off-roading, gardening, fitness, pets, life style, and education.

Considering the goal of helping the community to deliberate, the provision of a civilized space for expression in itself is a first step. Occasions were observed where an opinion to an issue expressed in one letter to the editor drew agreement or elaboration from other letters.

The case of *NWV* suggests that the high degree of people involvement in participatory journalism does not in itself bear an automatic connection to the goals of public journalism. Yet if some people in the locality are already interested in public affairs, an accommodating professional frame would allow them to use the space to engage the

other members of the community, and possibly to discuss or even deliberate for solutions.

Public journalists could facilitate such deliberation by providing opportunities of

discussion among contributors as a starting point for involving the other members of the

community in acting on public issues. Interest in public issues could be encouraged

through staff-written stories, selection of certain topics for interaction, and positive

response to the public concerns expressed in the community. In *NWV*, the librarian was

invited to be a columnist after contributing a few articles voluntarily.

If the goals of public journalism are desired, the link between the private and the public is

what professional journalists could focus in soliciting contributions. In the context of

these hyperlocal news products, the connection between the private and the public is

particularly strong. In one case, almost 50 residents around a road corner in northwest

Bakersfield banded together to oppose a residential complex proposed there by the

county planning commission on reasons of traffic congestion, school load, and, possibly,

their own property values. The question is: even if people do get engaged in these

hyperlocal communities, to what extent does this engagement enhance deliberative

democracy? Public journalism has drawn criticism that the geographical community does

not equate the public (Schudson 1999). The model of participatory journalism based in

hyperlocal communities may necessitate other venues for people to engage in issues that

cut across these communities. However, hyperlocal participatory journalism is conceived

on a business model supported by local advertising, and is implemented in localities

where growth is rapid: Bluffton is the fastest growing town in South Carolina; the

northwest is the fastest growing neighborhood in Bakersfield. The towns or

neighborhoods that are in decline may never see a community news site or newspaper practicing participatory journalism.

For larger news operations, participatory journalism normally constitutes only a small fraction of the entire content. The company that owns *NWV* also owns *The Bakersfield Californian* (*TBC*), a daily broadsheet circulated in the entire Bakersfield. *TBC* has tried various ways of involving the news users, and at the time of my observation, practiced participatory journalism in several sections of the paper. One such section was "Topic of the day," which sought the votes and views of readers to a selected news issue. The results of the voting and the views – cast and expressed on its web site -- are reported in the following day's paper. Another section was "Cheers and jeers," which was "a weekly feature inviting readers to praise, salute, criticize and nag their neighbors, public officials, community institutions and the newspaper." Twice a week it published a readers' column "Sound off." *TBC* also allowed news users' participation in news making by soliciting their suggestion of problems with public services, which the "Californian watchdog" would investigate for a weekly feature.

By giving multiple venues for members of the community to voice their views and share experiences, *TBC*'s participatory journalism seems to connect the news operation to the community. Since the involvement surrounds public issues, the people are engaged as citizens. However, the third goal of public journalism, of helping the community to deliberate, does not necessarily result from engaging public participation in news making.

Connecting to citizen journalism as an act of public journalism

Blog, as a form of citizen journalism, gives the impression that it is highly influential (Seelye et al. 2005). Yet I would argue that its influence depends on the mainstream news media taking cues from its content. This could be a healthy connection, if not for the fact that journalists are highly selective in what blogs they read.

Journalists taking cues from elite blogs

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that journalists read blogs. But not just any blog. Like blog readers in general, journalists tend to concentrate on a small number of them. Studies have found that a very few blogs have many inbound links, while a large number of blogs have few or zero inbound links (Drezner and Farrell 2004; Kottke 2003; Shirky 2003). The blogs with many inbound links are highly read ones to which other blogs link in the hope of getting read. In Shirky's (2003) study, among a sample of 433 blogs, the top two sites accounted for 5% of the inbound links; the top dozen (less than 3% of the total) accounted for 20% of the inbound links, and the top 50 blogs (not quite 12%) accounted for 50% of such links. In Drezner and Farrell's (2004) study on political blogs, editors, reporters, columnists and publishers from a range of news media from "elite" outlets to rural publications were asked to name three blogs they read frequently. Among the 140 respondents, the top 10 blogs made up more than 54% of all the citations. The concentration was even higher among "elite" media respondents: The top 10 blogs were responsible for over 74% of the citations; the top five alone were responsible for more than 56% of the mentions (Drezner and Farrell 2004).

Many of the elite blogs are written by journalists with close ties to mainstream

media outlets. Mickey Kaus wrote for the *New Republic* and *Newsweek* before starting

kausfiles.com. Andrew Sullivan was an editor at the *New Republic* as well as a regular

columnist for the *New York Times* magazine prior to launching AndrewSullivan.com.

Joshua Micah Marshall worked at the *American Prospect* and freelanced for several other

political magazines prior to starting TalkingPointsMemo.com (Drezner and Farrell 2004).

These ties made their blogs trusted sources of opinion and information for the

mainstream news media. And it is through the mainstream news media that blogs have

exercised their influence.

Citizen blogs piggybacking on mainstream journalism

Blogs have broken a small number of big news stories and raised opinions on significant

issues, but the significance of the stories and opinions were felt only after the mainstream

news media followed them up. The resignation of the incoming U.S. Senate majority

leader, Trent Lott, is a notable case to which citizen blogs were credited. On 5 December

2002, Lott made a quasi-endorsement of the South Carolina segregationist, Strom

Thurmond, at a party. The first report of it probably appeared on Joshua Micah

Marshall's blog, "Talking Points Memo" (at 3:20 pm ET, 6 December) (Glaser 2002),

and ABCNews.com's "The Note" blog (Halperin et al. 2002) (one of those blogs

sanctioned and hosted by mainstream news organizations but written by outsiders), but

one-and-a-half hours after Marshall's posting, *Slate,* a professional online magazine also

reported it (Noah 2002), and the *Washington Post* covered it on December 7 (Edsall

2002). Many of the blogs that kept the issue alive (Burkeman 2002) linked to the *Slate* article (which referred to the ABC blog) rather than Marshall's piece (Ó Baoill 2004).

The numbers show that the public opinion around the issue was unlikely to have been formed by the blogs alone without the coverage by the mainstream news media. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found in a survey in March 2003 that only 4% of online Americans (which made up 63% of the population) sought information or opinions from blogs (Rainie et al. 2003). A study conducted by research firm Ipsos-Reid for *American Demographics* found slightly higher, but still low, figures -- that 5% of American adults had read a blog, while 17 % were aware of their existence (Whelan 2003).

The resignation of the CNN news executive, Eason Jordan, in February 2005 was regarded as another incident of blog power . Again in this case, after Jordan made his comment about the targeting by the U.S. military of American journalists in a panel discussion on January 28, it was the blogs, not the mainstream media, that first reported it. But then the mainstream news media caught on widely before Jordan resigned on February 11 -- the *Washington Times* published an editorial on February 4; columns appeared in the *Washington Post* on February 8 (Kurtz 2005) and the *New York Post* on February 9, on the night of which a show on CNBC also interviewed three senators on the issue (Malkin 2005). These were followed by an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on February 10 (Stephens 2005).

In February 2005, a Gallup national survey found that fewer than 15% of Americans read blogs regularly (at least a few times a month). Even among Internet users in America, the figure was similarly low: 19% (Saad 2005).

At least part of the growth in blog use in the U.S. in 2004 sprang from the presidential election, but only some 9% of internet users said they read political blogs "frequently" or "sometimes" during the campaign (Rainie 2005). During the 2004 presidential election, television news was the most used news source by Americans (78%), followed by newspapers (39%), and then the Internet (18%) (Rainie and Horrigan 2005). For those Americans who went online for political news, 89% got it from the web sites of traditional news organizations (Rainie and Horrigan 2005). In the Gallup survey only 3% of Americans said they read Internet blogs every day, and just 2% read politics-focused blogs daily. It is clear that the committed readership of blogs is so small that blogs are far from being genuine competitors to the mainstream news organizations as providers of news to the general public.

Self-publishing is not a novel phenomenon. The past forms of it have not drawn interest to any degree comparable to that enjoyed by blogs. Social movement organizations have been actively using the web for disseminating news and mobilizing action in the last decade. The activists in Seattle have published their protest voices against the World Trade Organization on the web and in other media for more than five years, and their efforts have grown into an international network of alternative websites under the Independent Media Center (Indymedia). Electronic bulletin boards, which originated

independently of the Internet, have migrated to the web in large numbers, while new

bulletin boards were created on the web in the 1990s. Personal web sites are everywhere.

The ease in posting and linking of the blogging technology may contribute in part to the

popularity of blogs, but it seems that the interest of the journalists in them is an important

factor.

Some news operations have adopted the form for their journalists to write blogs on their

web sites. But generally journalists see citizen blogs as a threat because they challenge

the privilege of journalists in defining what is news. Citizen blogs also connect to their

readers better than mainstream news operations (Regan 2003). In fact journalists hold the

view that blogs in general are "poorly written, self-absorbed, hyper-opinionated, and

done by amateurs" (Regan 2003). This view does not facilitate a healthy connection

between mainstream journalism and citizen journalism.

Connecting for public life

By virtue of the fact that citizen journalism is produced entirely by the people themselves,

the issue of news organizations connecting to the communities is dissolved. What could

blogs -- which gather communities of readers around -- achieve for the offline

communities depend on the purpose of establishment, the resources of the operators, the

technological characteristics, the accessibility, and the norm setting role of the

administrators of the communication spaces, as well as the degree of overlap between the

online participants and the offline communities (Nip 2004a). As far as engagement in

public issues goes, individual endeavors of citizen journalism, limited by access and

resources, normally cannot provide adequate accounts of a comprehensive range of public events or issues of a geographic area on the basis of which engagement could take place. Their value is more likely to lie in being specialist reporters and commentators in specific areas. The small audience that citizen journalism captures, as indicated by blog viewership, also means that although self-publishing about public affairs is in itself an act of citizen engagement, it has limited impact in engaging wider segments of the community. Connecting mainstream news organizations to citizen journalists would benefit both sides.

One form of connection is the news journalists turn to citizen blogs for story ideas. The danger is if journalists concentrate on reading just what is produced by their fellow journalists, then they merely replicate the disconnection problem that public journalism tries to address. Most citizen journals revolve around private matters, but news organizations could select those that focus on public issues relevant to their localities, and source story ideas from them. Citizen journalists are likely to be opinion leaders who in themselves are useful news sources, or who can introduce further news sources. They could be invited to participate in the discussion on the newspaper's online forums or live chats. Building connection to the concerned citizens is a strategic step towards building connection to the community.

Content could be excerpted from these citizen sites for use in news stories or publication on the organizations' news web sites. Recommendations could be made to readers about which citizen journals are worth reading. Going one step further, news organizations

could engage members of the community in producing content on public issues. *The Spokesman-Review*, for example, has organized seminars to teach people how to blog (Ken Sands, author's interview, 7 March 2005), and its online site links to the local blogs. Concerned citizens could be enlisted as contributing reporters or commentators for the news organizations to gather news and views about activities, trades, professions, and localities in which the citizen journalists are experts. The networking with the citizen journalists could serve as a starting point of partnership for certain public issues from time to time, and for deliberation of solutions in the pursuit of the higher goals of public journalism.

Conclusion

After more than a decade since the term public journalism was coined, the movement has come to a second phase. The phase when public journalism was promoted in project form by grant money was gone. A good number of news organizations have tried doing public journalism, and most in the profession have accepted at least two of its three main goals (Poynteronline 2003). The Internet has brought interactive potential for enhancing public life, but they have not been embraced to any large extent. When the Internet offers the capability that could destroy the journalists' monopoly of news making, the news media are forced to respond by giving the news users a role in news making. In this light, participatory journalism represents an attempt of the news media to incorporate the change in the relationship between professional journalism and the people made inevitable by technological change, and as championed by public journalism. This change, from a lecture to conversation, as is often put (Bowman and Willis 2003), in itself

embeds the goal of public journalism of connecting to the community, and, to a lesser

extent, engaging the people as citizens --without it being called public journalism as such.

Unlike in the first phase of public journalism, where news organizations initiated the

engagement, in this second phase, the public themselves hold the possibility of taking the

initiative. Some of the news organizations that had successful experiences of public

journalism have not been able to sustain the culture that facilitates public journalism

(Friedland 2003). If there were any guarantee that interactive or participatory journalism

would continue to grow, it would have to come from the people acting as citizens in the

first place. Interactive journalism does offer the possibility of public deliberation, but

there does not seem to be much evidence of it happening. The Indiana University survey

was reported to have asked about "pointing people toward possible solutions to society's

problems" as a goal of public journalism (Poynteronline 2003). The wording of the goal

suggests an informational role in terms of helping to find solutions. The decision reported

of *The Wichita Eagle* earlier in this paper probably signals the retreat from a highly

controversial role, which was played by some public journalism newsrooms, of

convening the public in search for solutions.

Since the Internet is the main platform for the practice of interactive and participatory

journalism, there arises an intriguing question as to how the online participation, if

formed, may connect to offline life. There needs to be a way of bringing the citizens from

online to offline, where the majority of real politics plays out. Because of individual

differences in media choice; time arrangement; social, writing, and computer skills; and

accessibility to Internet resources, those who become active citizens online may not

overlap substantially with those who are active offline. Electronic community networks

set up before the age of the Internet have influenced local communities in complex ways.

In some cases, local communities were strengthened with improved communication and a

greater sense of citizen involvement (Kavanaugh 1999). In others, online communities

were formed (Uncapher 1999), which in some cases then gave rise to new offline

communities (Rogers et al. 1994). Yet, in others, uneven participation threatened to make

the network irrelevant to the offline community. A study on the potential of online

newspapers to reinforce the public sphere has suggested that "[t]he kinds of material that

are most successful online are those that address the concerns of the elite, and the online

public sphere will embody the same sorts of exclusions that are present offline, but in a

more extreme form" (Sparks 2003). The awareness that the online space has its own logic

rather than being merely an extension of the offline world should guard against the

thinking that participatory channels online would outdate offline channels of engaging

the community. The challenge facing public journalism is not only to offer both online

and offline channels for people to participate, but also to manage the people's

participation in both types of channels in a way that a connection can be built between the

two communities of participants. This may be a task beyond what journalism is meant to

achieve. What is for sure is that the new tools of the web, while providing new

opportunities for public journalism, also increases the complexity of the tasks involved in

achieving its goals.

Notes

1. The idea that civic (public) journalism is entering a second phase was suggested to me by Jan Schaffer, Director of the Institute for Interactive Journalism, in November 2004.

2. The term "public journalism" is used here to encompass also civic journalism, as the two terms are often used interchangeably.

3. By saying this, I do not imply that the Institute for Interactive Journalism, Jan Schaffer or Jay Rosen has given up the goals of public journalism.

4. In its Vision 2010 project, which won the 2002 Batten Award, *Savannah Morning News* brought together 60 citizens – 15 business leaders, 15 educators, 15 non profit leaders and 15 parents – who "in effect served as the assigning editor for the stories." "They pretty much directed our coverage. They said: this is what we want to know, and we went out and tried to find it and came back and they said well…now we want to go there and actually see it. Pay for us to go out and see it…. [T]wenty some of those people actually traveled out of state…. About another 10 moved to places in the state…or just over the border in South Carolina" (Dan Suwyn, former Managing Editor, *Savannah Morning News*, author's interview, 18 January 2005). Members of the group also wrote over half of the stories of the project (Pew Projects, Available http://www.pewcenter.org/project/getProject.php?state=GA)

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